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ABSTRACT

Apparently, textbooks still profoundly influence teachers' behavior and what students have an opportunity to learn in schools. Textbook content may be substantially influenced by seven conglomerate-owned publishing companies earning 57 percent of textbook revenue and by two states (Florida and Texas) with policies mandating statewide use of a selected set of texts. A study of 10 kindergarten through sixth-grade classrooms found that (1) teachers used textbook guides and accompanying materials extensively; (2) classroom material was taught by lecture/recitation, reading aloud and answering questions, and extensive practice in workbooks and on dittoes; (3) students viewed work as a series of things to complete; (4) teachers seemed to view the curriculum as a series of pages to cover; (5) various factors accounted for the extensive use of texts; and (6) the curriculum was organized by subjects, with text materials supporting this approach. Most curricular materials encouraged passivity and convergent thinking, requiring students to "fill-in-the-blanks." Across grade levels, students' responses to the textbook-centered environment frequently took the form of social games and individual diversions. Some students were aware that the "hidden" reason for doing a worksheet was to give the teacher time to grade papers or prepare for an upcoming lesson. Textbooks themselves may not be the source of students' boredom; the ultimate cause may reside in mainstream American cultural beliefs. (RH)

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"A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO TEXTBOOK-CENTERED CLASSROOMS"

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Background

For several years now, we have been quite concerned about the relationship between textbooks and the curriculum. Most of the literature in the field seems to discuss curriculum development as if textbooks didn't exist, yet they appear to have a profound influence upon what teachers do and thereby upon what students have an opportunity to learn in schools.

In McCutcheon's study of teacher planning (McCutcheon, 1981), she found that most plans were related in one way or another to the textbook. For many teachers, ideas for content were derived solely from the text, and materials most frequently used in lessons were the textbook, workbook, the teacher's guide ideas for boardwork, and accompanying dittoes and tests. Over fifty years ago, in 1931, William Bagley wrote that teachers were dependent on the text for most of the day. More recent research seems to bear this out as well. A study done by the Educational Products Information Exchange in 1978 reports that most of what students do in classrooms is textbook-related. Frymier, Davis and Clinefelter in 1977 found that 78% of the curriculum materials that are used in classrooms are print based, and that approximately 98% of the messages received by classroom students came directly from printed instructional materials rather than from teachers.

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The National Science Foundation studies by Stake, Easley, et al (1978) also support this impression about the extensive use of textbooks; they found in general that textbooks were being used rather than the "new" curricula in science and social studies.

This welter of literature raises several questions. For one, over 150 companies compete for school district's money, but recently seven firms have been earning 57% of the revenue (Bowler, 1978). Many such companies are owned by conglomerates such as IBM, Xerox, Bell & Howell, CBS, The New York Times, Litton and ITT. Two states - Florida and Texas - because of their single statewide adoptions seem to influence what is contained in some of those texts (see Black, 1967; Bowler, 1978). We might wonder in what respects the profit motive of such conglomerates and the values of two states' adoption boards should influence what is taught in schools nationwide. Is there an inherent conflict between the profit motive and developing educationally sound materials? Is there an inherent conflict between the ideal of a pluralistic nation and conservative forces influencing the textbook industry and thereby the curriculum of our nation? If the research about the extent of textbook use is true, should such companies and the values of two states control the curriculum? Secondly, we know little about the nature of use of such materials. We have statistics pointing to an extensive use of texts, and some indication that this has been the case for at least fifty years, but we know little about the nature, character, and qualities of teachers' and students' uses of these materials.

During the Spring of 1981, the Spencer Foundation funded a research project aimed at discovering how textbooks were used and their effects on

those involved in curriculum making - children, teachers, parents, administrators. Ten elementary school classrooms from one school representing grades K-6 were observed over a period of ten weeks (March-May, 1981). Over 200 pages of field notes were amassed and another 100 pages of transcripts of interviews were collected.

Our study could be described as collaborative in that the principal had critiqued the proposal, teachers and outsider-researchers worked together to gather information, speculate, raise questions and offer interpretations. It could be described as phenomenological in that insider's perspectives were sought. It could be described as ethnographic in that the relationship between the school culture and textbook use was studied. And it could be described as qualitative in that the primary focus was upon the qualities - i.e., the character, nature or essence of textbook use and its relationship to those participating in the curriculum.

Findings

The findings of the study and the supporting evidence are not particularly surprising. More than anything else, perhaps, they provide empirical support for several commonsense notions about practice. We found:

1. In this school nine of ten teachers used textbook guides and accompanying materials extensively with few, infrequent changes. Among those changes were:

   a) reordering questions

   b) providing local examples related to material in the text

   c) omitting material deemed redundant or too difficult

   d) omitting activities that called for manipulations, group-work, divergent thinking, a lot of movement or materials not readily available.

2. In nine of ten classrooms material was usually taught by:

   a) lecture/recitation

   b) reading aloud and answering related questions

   c) extensive practice in workbooks and dittoes.

3. In these classrooms, work was viewed by students as a series of things to complete (not as exercises from which to learn).

4. Nine of ten teachers seemed to view the curriculum as a series of pages to cover.

5. Various factors seem to account for this widespread, extensive use of texts:

   a) beliefs that because the School Board ordered the texts, they must be used

   b) peer pressure

   c) parent pressure

   d) the state - required, locally - written courses of study

   e) beliefs about what school should be like

   f) ease of use, clear organization

   g) responsibility to plan and teach seven to eight subjects, sometimes with three ability groups, yet rich understanding of fewer subjects and little planning time

   h) former principals who had high school experience and had difficulty giving advice about effective teaching of elementary school students

   i) a lack of many other materials

   j) beliefs about the need for uniformity and continuity

   k) previous education courses which did not help teachers critique materials, develop curricula or units, or make materials

6. The curriculum in this school was organized by subjects; text materials play a major role in supporting this. Most of the curriculum materials were two-dimensional, calling for passivity, convergent-thinking, and were characterized by filling in the blanks (written and orally). Supplementary materials, when used, were usually of the same type.

What exactly was the nature of the children's responses to such textbook-centered environments? Their responses quite often took the form of social games such as tic-tac-toe, note-passing, and communicating through mime (i.e., making faces). However, games played by individual children on their own were even more prevalent. While it might possibly be argued that the social games sometimes involved children in creative behavior, many of the games children played on their own - sticking cotton in one's ear, eating glue, or using a textbook as a ramp up which to blow dustballs - were less than educative. Most of these responses and games appeared across grade levels; perhaps they represented children's battle with boredom.

In order to illustrate this point, below is a running commentary of one boy's behavior - which did not appear to be atypical - during a "language lesson."

with hands on back of head looks at board
raises hand quickly, put it back down quickly
rubs eyes
yawns
chomps on gum and tries to blow bubble
smiles at boy across room
(teacher continues to talk through the lesson in teacher's guide)
looks at other pages in the book
grinning at friend again, shakes head
stretches
watches book while teacher reads aloud
stretches
blank stare
yawns
stares with lowered eyebrows at boy across room
looks at thumb, picks at it
looks through book
whispers to student sitting next to him
communicates something nonverbally to boy across room
teacher picks him, he answers two questions with two words

In all, the language lesson has lasted 55 minutes. The oral language used by the boy has been two words: "below" and "before", the answers to the teacher's questions.

In addition to the social and individual games discussed above, there was another "game" of sorts being played which deserves to be mentioned. This was a game played with implicit rules by both children and teachers. For example, some of the children were aware that the "hidden" reason for doing a worksheet quietly at their seats was to give the teacher time to grade papers or prepare for an upcoming lesson. It is the kinds of games mentioned above that curriculum scholars refer to as the "hidden curriculum" (Jackson, 1968).

Closing

At first glance, the source of this boredom might appear to be the textbooks themselves. But it is more likely that the source is embedded in mainstream American cultural beliefs where a reductionistic stance toward schooling is taken as well as a perspective which characterizes learning as merely the application of technology. Moreover, there is the implication that: 1) learning exists outside of the learner and 2) subject matter (and the broader curriculum) is best learned by breaking it down into smaller pieces. Once broken down, the pieces themselves often become meaningless (e.g., the breaking down of reading into phonic skills). Yet, educational psychologists tell us that it is much easier for human beings to learn something that is meaningful than that which is nonsense.

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